

**Somali Refugee Youth in Maryland:
Needs Assessment**

**Dina Birman
Edison J. Trickett
University of Illinois at Chicago**

**Natalia Bacchus
University of Maryland**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A needs assessment of Somali refugee youth in Prince George's County, Maryland was conducted during the 2000-2001 school year. The purpose of this study was to gather information on the school and life experiences of Somali students and to make recommendations for improving their circumstances. To address this goal, the research team conducted a series of individual and group interviews with Somali youth, parents, community leaders, public school teachers, and countywide school personnel in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department and International Student Guidance Office (ISGO) of Prince George's County Public Schools. These interviews focused on academic, behavioral, and mental health issues facing Somali students and the people that work with them.

While we found that Somali students are for the most part doing well in school and American society, several themes and issues emerged during these interviews. The Somali youths told us about their difficulties adapting to American schools, including feeling different, getting into fights, encountering religious issues at school, having academic problems, dealing with family life in the U.S., and the challenge of planning for the future. Somali parents told us their concerns about their children's academic problems and the discipline they receive at school. Teachers relayed to us the various issues they encountered, including students' academic, behavioral, mental health, and social adjustment problems, student placement and assessment issues, lack of ESOL teachers and the challenges they face trying to increase parental involvement.

To address the issues raised, we provide a listing of the many resources we found at the county and school level, and a "toolkit of best practices" found to be successful by many teachers. In addition we include a recommendations section where we brainstorm various new ideas for working with these problems.

The wide range of issues and possible solutions discovered by interviewing individuals from across all levels of the school system and within the community suggest the value of gathering information from different stakeholders. Many discrete, specific suggestions have emerged from our interviews with parents, students, and school system personnel. Where the energy and resources are available, they should be developed to the fullest to help improve the educational and life circumstances for Somali and other refugee youth living in Prince George's County, Maryland.

BACKGROUND

A needs assessment of Somali refugee youth in Prince George's County, Maryland was conducted in 2000-2001, at the request of the Maryland Office for New Americans. The purpose of the project was to gather information on the experiences of these youths, primarily in the school context, focusing on the experience of adolescents. Adolescents are seen as a particularly important segment of the population because they are in the stage of life when they are struggling with identity conflicts, and their schooling lays the foundation for future transitions into additional schooling, labor force, and the larger society. The information summarized in this report is intended to serve as a guide for the development of resources to improve their life experiences in school and beyond. However, our hope is that the contents of this report can be helpful in addressing the needs of groups other than Somalis as well. Schools must accommodate a diversity of refugees and immigrants, and many of the issues that have been identified as relevant to Somalis are relevant to other refugee populations. Thus, while our focus has been on understanding the experience of Somali refugee adolescents, our findings, particularly those based on interviews with teachers and other school personnel, address larger concerns with diverse refugee populations.

The report is organized as follows: First, a brief history of Somali culture and traditions is presented as background for understanding the breadth and depth of the issues they have faced as a consequence of immigration. Next, we outline the procedures we went through to gather data on the issues facing both the Somali youth and the schools they attend. Finally, we summarize our findings and recommend next steps related to providing relevant structure and services to improve their chances for successful adaptation in this country, and can be useful to enhance adaptation of other refugee children as well.

Overview of Somali History, Culture, and Traditions

Somalia is located in Eastern Africa, bordered by Kenya to the south, Ethiopia on the West, Djibouti on the northwest, and the Gulf of Aden on the north. Its population is primarily rural, with over 75% of the people being farmers or raising camels, cattle, sheep, and goats. The climate is hot, with both rainy and dry seasons.

In 1988 an armed revolt broke out against the regime of Somali President Siad Barre and people began leaving in the following year. Clans became polarized and waged war against one another. By late 1991 war had intensified, Siad Barre was forced into exile, and about 45% of the population was displaced inside Somalia or neighboring countries. Nomads came to the cities to fight for power and destroyed buildings, looted, and raped and killed city civilians. Families had to leave the cities by any means possible, usually airplane or boat, and many tales of the horrors associated with this process have been told. Children witnessing the death or rape of family members, executions in one's house, and girls being kept captive for years and routinely abused by soldiers have been reported. The issue of trauma is thus central to an appreciation of what the Somalis bring to their life in the United States.

Somalis speak the Somali language (and some, due to a history of colonization, Italian and English as well). They come from a sophisticated culture organized around clans that differ by ancestry and region of the country. Somalis are Sunni Muslims, with Islam being the principal faith and source of Somali national identity. Following such customs as Somali dress and choice of foods is both a source of religious affirmation and a set of practices that have resulted in some cultural misunderstandings and conflicts when practiced in the public schools in Prince George's County, Maryland

In Somali families men are the authority figures and decision-makers, though here in the U.S. women often work outside the home in addition to child-rearing and home responsibilities. Children attend Koranic school for religious education at an early age and faithfully observe Ramadan. Somalis deeply value family. They tend to keep problems to themselves rather than share them with cultural outsiders.

The Somali community in which we spent our time during the past year consists of members of the Benadir clan. As described to us by Mr. Nasir Mayow, a Somali community leader, the Benadir differ from other clans in Somalia in several ways. Historically, their ancestors are said to be from the Persian Gulf and ruled kingdoms in Somalia before colonialism. At the time of the war in the early 1990s, they tended to live in cities such as Mogadishu (the capital), Merca, and Brava, rather than the more rural locations as did other clans. In addition, they are not nomadic as are many other clans, but hold such jobs as merchants and importers/exporters in the cities. They are also more highly educated than other clans, having gone to universities both in Somalia and abroad.

The Refugee Experience and Resettlement

The Somali refugees had a difficult journey to the U.S. The majority fled Somalia in the midst of the war, and ended up in Kenya or other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt. The escape itself, most often by boat, was very dangerous. After the escape, many of the refugees stayed in Kenya, or made their way to other countries, where they stayed for many years. Some families made their way into the cities and were able to work. However, without permanent resident status and permission to work they were subject to harassment by police. In order to apply for asylum in the U.S. the refugees had to return to the refugee camps, fill out paperwork, and wait for their U.S. refugee status, sometimes for several years. The conditions in the camps were very primitive. Refugees lived in crowded tents. The weather was very hot and conditions unsafe, such as the presence of snakes in the camps.

The refugees started coming to Maryland for resettlement in 1996, when a large group was resettled through Lutheran Social Services in Prince George's County. The Somali community is very concentrated, with the majority living in one apartment complex in Riverdale and others in nearby Landover. These communities are predominantly African American and low-income neighborhoods. As a consequence, the majority of the American students in the schools where Somali children are enrolled are lower income African American. Somalis children and youth reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood. They are particularly frightened by crime, and some have had dangerous

confrontations. Some described feeling worried that something may have happened to their friends when one of them is late and is walking home in the neighborhood. One youth was attacked while working in McDonald's. They report seeing drug dealers in the neighborhood. These experiences rekindle the fear and uncertainty of their refugee experiences and make them feel like they are not yet safe.

The Somali community has retained many key aspects of their culture and lives in Somalia. They remain a very religious community, as reflected in time in prayer, head coverings for women and adolescent girls, and restrictions on the activities of adolescents. Religious leaders are revered, and the community in Riverdale has pooled resources to rent an apartment that serves as a mosque. Religious education is provided by Somali leaders for children and youth on weekends.

Somali families living in the apartment complex are large and often interrelated. Living conditions are crowded. These conditions contrast starkly with the conditions in Somalia before the war, as refugees related to us that each extended family owned a house, the mothers were able to stay home and take care of the family, and materially they had everything they needed. The standard of living here in the United States thus differs for these refugees from their prior lives. In addition, the American concern with materialism contrasted with their lives in Somalia. As one boy related, *"in Somalia you wore sandals, and if your sandals broke, you fixed them. In the United States you have to wear sneakers, and other students make fun of you if you don't have the right kind of (expensive) sneakers."*

Thus, Somali history and culture, their experiences fleeing their country, and the context of resettlement all influence the lives of Somali children and youth in adjusting to the United States.

METHOD OF THE PROJECT

Purpose

Concerns among Somali leaders about their children's experiences led us to focus on their lives, particularly as reflected in the school context. The purpose of this study, then, was to gather information on the school experiences of Somali students, particularly adolescents, and to make recommendations for improving their circumstances. To address this goal the research team conducted a series of individual and group interviews with Somali children, parents, community leaders, public school teachers, and countywide school personnel in the International Student Guidance Office (ISGO) of Prince George's County. These interviews focused on academic, behavioral, and mental health issues facing Somali students. In addition to these interviews, a member of the research team became involved as a tutor meeting with a group of the students twice a week after school. These tutoring meeting lasted during the school year and over the summer. This gave her an opportunity to get to know the children more informally, become acquainted with the struggles they had with their schoolwork, and have access to their teachers. The primary concern of our work involved a focus on how Somali children and youth were faring in public school. The results of our interviews with both students and school system personnel reveal a complex picture of the issues involved.

Interviews

Students. The following interviews were held: 3 focus groups, one with adolescents currently in middle school (5 children), one with adolescents currently in high school (6 students), and one with young adults who have finished high school (3 young adults) and could look back on their middle school and high school experiences. In the first 2 groups were students who have been in the U.S. for a relatively long time (5-6 years) and relatively new arrivals (a few months).

Parents. Interviews were conducted with 4 parents of the students. 2 focus groups of parents were held, one with fathers, and one with mothers.

School Personnel. Interviews were conducted with 6 staff from the PG County offices, including international student specialists, an outreach counselor, and a guidance counselor. A number of schools that have Somali students were contacted, including 3 High Schools (Bladensburg, Central, Parkdale), 2 Middle Schools (Kenmoor, William Wirt), and 2 Elementary Schools (Judge Sylvania Wood, Templeton). Over twenty interviews were conducted with 15 ESOL teachers, an ESOL Aide, a Parent Liaison, a “mainstream” teacher and homework club tutor/volunteer coordinator.

FINDINGS

The Student Experience

Somali students first arrived in 1996 in a relatively large wave, with 120 Somali students were registered in PG county schools in that year. While the Somali community has decreased overall in the past few years, during the 2000-2001 school year there were still 113 Somalis in PG county schools - 54 in 9 elementary schools, 59 in 10 secondary schools (MS and HS).

Somali students brought to school with them the strong bond forged by culture, religion, shared hardships, and a common experience in adjusting to a new land. While they find some commonality with other international students in their ESOL classes, they are closest to other Somalis. Some of the children are related to each other, and others live in blended families where they call other unrelated children in the household “brothers” and “sisters”. The sense of family and community in these households is very strong.

Many of the Somali students do have relationships with American students, but there are difficulties linked to cultural differences around appropriate behavior, particularly for adolescents. Thus, Somalis who are friends with other Americans have to restrict some of the activities they engage in because many things that Americans do Somali children are not allowed to do. For example, it is not seen as appropriate for Somalis to go out in mixed sex groups, which eliminates many of the activities Americans engage in. To avoid getting into trouble, Somalis prefer to go out with other Somalis or with their families to the movies or to go shopping. These and other cultural differences affect the school experiences of these students

Early experiences adapting to American schools

Certain themes recurred in our interviews with Somali students and they are described below.

Being different. One initial source of difficulty, particularly with American students, was being treated badly because of being different. All the Somali students we spoke with who went to middle or high school recalled being teased and taunted about their clothing, the girls for wearing scarves, and their lack of English-speaking ability. One girl explained the American students’ behavior:

“I think why they acted the way they did the first time we came in is because we had an impact on them too. They had their own people around and suddenly all these weirdoes came in. Even though we aren’t weird, we are different. So I think if before we came there if the school talked about it – that there are some Somali kids coming, that they went through a civil war – that maybe they (the American students) would be sympathetic.”

Students also felt that they had been unprepared to encounter what they did at school. Just as they hoped that American students and teachers would have been told more about them, they wished that they had been told about what difficulties they may initially encounter, such as the teasing, name-calling, and people not knowing who they were and why they were in school.

Somali children also expressed bewilderment at how few opportunities they had when they first arrived to explain to others where they came from. Indeed, teachers we interviewed frequently expressed reluctance to ask the students about their past, citing a concern about activating traumatic past experiences and the belief that these students must be asked about their lives all the time and are tired of talking about it. However, students indicated that they were very willing to talk about their country, and most said they were pleased to be asked. It did bother them, however, when people asked them “dumb” questions like “did you walk around naked in Africa?” or “did you sleep in trees?” *“When they would ask us that we would just ask it back,”* said one boy, *“we’d ask ‘do you sleep in the trees?’ They would answer ‘no’ and we’d say ‘well neither do we’.”*

Fights. Some of the confrontations with American students escalated from verbal confrontations to fist fighting. Fighting happened among the girls as well as the boys. *“They would say that we smelled bad and dressed funny,”* said a Somali girl. When asked if there was any way to avoid the fighting, a boy replied *“No. If you try to ignore them, they push you.”* Some kids said that they felt at the school it was bad to be “smart” at school. One middle school student said he had once gotten into a fight over a grade on a math test because he had a higher grade than the American kid. One student mentioned that being smart makes others think you are “acting White”. She said she did not really know what that meant.

A particularly difficult incident happened at Parkdale High School in 1997, toward the end of the first school year that the Somalis were at the school. A fight had broken out in the school cafeteria because of “butting” in line. Apparently started by an American student, the pushing quickly escalated into a fight between Somali and American students. In response to the incident, the administrators felt that the tensions between Somali and American students were running high. In addition, it was school spirit week, and faculty and students were trying to promote a celebratory and positive climate. To handle the situation, the school decided that to prevent any further tensions Somali students would be sent home. All the Somali students at the school, including those who had not been in the cafeteria when the incident happened, were called out of class, put on a school bus, and sent home. However, the bus took the students only to Parkview Gardens apartments, even though some students did not live there, and these students had to find their own way home. Further, apparently none of the American students involved with the fight were punished.

In the aftermath of this incident, Somali students and parents were extremely angry and concerned about how they had been treated. It appeared to them that the school, even the adults at the school, had made no attempts to understand them, and when tensions rose

banished them from the school as if they did not belong there, rather than addressing the underlying problem.

As a consequence of this incident, Somali students from Parkview Gardens began riding a separate school bus to school. When Somalis came to the area, the one bus that had been sent in prior years was not big enough to accommodate all the kids from Parkview Gardens. An additional bus was sent; one came earlier, the other later. The American students would push their way onto the earlier bus, and when Somali students got on fights would break out. So to avoid fighting between the American and Somali students, the Americans would take the earlier bus, and the Somalis the later bus. *“It was easier to separate us (Americans and refugees) than settle the stuff, I guess,”* said one Somali student.

It should be noted that fighting was not confined to encounters between Somali and American students. Reports from the homework club, consisting of all Somali youth, suggest that arguments and fights occurred there as well. Adults working with these youth have observed how quickly disagreements escalate into fights, and how physical these confrontations are.

Religious issues. Many issues of difference between Somali and American students involved religious practices. Religion remains a central part of the lives of the Somali students. This involves daily prayer, no dating, and it is not seen as appropriate for males and female adolescents to go out together to the movies or the mall. As one male said, *“In America everyone has a boyfriend or girlfriend. In Somali culture you don’t have one until you see a person you would like to marry.”* The students said that they could marry someone who is not Somali as long as they are Muslim or intend to become Muslim. The girls are supposed to keep their hair covered and boys are supposed to keep their hair short. They are not allowed to get tattoos.

Early on, Somali girls were singled out in school for observing the Somali religious custom of wearing scarves. American students kept asking the girls why they always wore scarves on their heads. Americans tried to pull the scarves off and said they wanted to see their hair. As one Somali girl put it, *“100 times we explain it to them, they don’t get it. But later on, right now, they understand the religion and its purpose. Now they understand why we wear the scarves, so now they accept us.”*

At Parkdale High School in particular problems with scarves arose because the school required picture IDs, and school staff wanted the girls to have their pictures taken without the scarves. In addition, the school had a policy prohibiting bandanas, because they had been used as a gang symbol. Some of the girls had adapted their scarves to wear as bandanas, so that they could respect their religious custom and blend in a bit more at the same time. In the end, the school was able to handle these issues appropriately, but early on, the girls reflected on how difficult it was for them to convince both other students and adults to respect this custom.

For boys, the biggest problem involved prayer, as they pray 5 times per day. Over time, Parkdale, as well as other schools, developed ways to accommodate the boys by excusing them from classes at particular times during the day. Teachers would write passes for students, and space was provided in some schools in the counseling offices or elsewhere to pray. During Ramadan students were allowed to stay in the classroom during lunchtime because they were fasting. On Fridays, students (mostly boys) were excused from school early to prepare for the Muslim holy day.

While all of these accommodations have made life much easier for the Somali students, it took time, energy, patience, and persistence on the part of Somali students and adults to educate schools about Somali culture.

Academic Adjustment. Somali students seemed to have a great deal of respect for school, stemming from the great importance placed on education in Somali culture and made even more important because of lack of prior schooling related to the war. Somali students shared with us several negative impressions of American students. First, they felt that American students are not respectful of teachers, whereas Somalis are very appreciative of being able to be in school and having an opportunity to get an education. In addition, respect for teachers and teacher authority to discipline children was greater in Somalia. They noted that American kids are ruder to their parents, talk back to them, don't listen, and are generally more disrespectful. Finally, they felt that without authority of teachers, American kids tease them, do not understand them, or appreciate what they have been through.

All students agreed that ESOL was their favorite class. *"You could be yourself. No one looked at you differently because you had a scarf or an accent. Everyone had an accent!" All our friends were from ESOL."*

The issue of dropping out of school was also discussed. Many different factors were mentioned, including the belief of some students that having a job and making money is better than going to school. Some cited the difficult conditions facing Somali students in school as well, such as doing poorly in school with no resources for help and not having friends in school. They all knew some Somali students who have dropped out of school. One Somali male said, *"Some people get lost, or graduate while still in ESOL, some people quit too."* When asked why this happens to some kids, a female said, *"They were sick and tired of it. Rebellious, I guess. They wouldn't listen to the teachers. They end up with the wrong people. In high school you see a lot of stuff, like drugs and stuff."* A male explained, *"They didn't fight. They take the easy way because they say 'This is hard, I cannot do this. So I'm gonna leave it, forget this stuff'."*

One male student's sister did not get to graduate high school because of the age limit placed on being in school (21 years of age). She was placed in 9th grade at age 18 and had to leave school in 12th grade when she turned 22. This really upset her and her family. Her brother said, *"Now she has to work everyday instead of having an education."*

Students vividly remembered the feeling of being lost on the first day of school, with no orientation, not being able to find their way around the building, and having no "buddy system" to help them even find their way to class (a particular concern in middle and high school). They felt that their introduction to school could have profited from 1) a better orientation to the school. 2) Having a "buddy system" where they are paired up with either an American student or foreign student who had been in the United States awhile who could explain how to figure things out. 3) Having a new students' group so they can share what they have learned or have questions about. 4) Having after school help for new students.

In addition, many students mentioned that they had problems keeping up with the pace of school due to their interrupted education in Somalia. Students' comments included:

"It was too much information. Suddenly I had to learn all this stuff very quickly."

"It was hard, they (teachers) expect you to do the work no matter what." And

"Some teachers used to understand us but not all. Like regular English teachers, they give you a test or essay and whether or not you understand it is up to you."

The lapse in their educational background also affected the way they felt about school and their motivation to keep trying. One male explained how the challenge made him work harder: *"When you don't know the subject you'll try to fight with it so you can get it. That's what I did."* A female explained how she sometimes wanted to give up but her family kept her going. *"Sometimes I felt like quitting, like skipping class. Then I'd think about how my dad is working, my mom is working, nobody is home, and everybody's trying so hard so you should try hard too. That's what kept me going."*

Legacy of Trauma. Resettlement professionals are frequently concerned about the impact of legacy of trauma on refugee children. We explored this issue in interviews. Most of the children came in 1996, and the younger ones do not remember Somalia or the war at all. Some have come more recently, some directly from Somalia, and lived through the violence there. Even older kids have a hard time remembering Somalia before the war.

The children said that they saw a lot of violence – in refugee camps and before in Somalia. Many had family members die. However, the children we interviewed did not think of themselves as having been traumatized. They draw strength from their religion, and say that everything that has happened to them and their people is God's will and should not be questioned. They said, *"In the Koran it states that God will not give you more than you can bear."* Therefore they believe their experiences are ones they can cope with and it will get better. They know that they have been through a lot and that their experiences are much different than what American kids have known. They say that is what makes them such a tight knit group.

Children did talk about their feelings of loss of many aspects of life in Somalia. In general, they missed the overall fabric of life in Africa, the regularity to life, the waking up to the call to prayer from a mosque, the routines, their friends, and their homes.

Family life. Somali children expressed great connection to their families. In some families, there is pressure for students to get a job and help support the family. Some end up dropping out of school to help out the family economically. One Somali student we interviewed drives his family around without having a license. Because mothers often have to work as well, there is less time for family than many would like. Households are more crowded here, with many families living together in small apartments. Several fathers have passed away and eldest sons have to assume the position of authority in the family. Many kids said they feel pressure to do well in school so they can get a good job and help their family move to a better place. The centrality of family life is reflected in the comments of children in high school, who say that they would not feel right going away to college and leaving their families. One male stated *“My mother took care of me all the way to this age. How can I leave my mother alone and live my own life?”* Thus, the family unit of these students has a great deal to cope with in terms of survival.

Future in the U.S. We asked the children to talk about how they saw their future; what kinds of things they envisioned for themselves as they grew up. In general, their view of their future here was not hopeful. Indeed, many stated that in the future they hope to live in Africa, another 3rd world country, or go back to Somalia. Behind this concern was a bleak picture of their current situation. They talked about difficulties they face adjusting to life in U.S., and several expressed concern that they do not see members of their community progressing here in the U.S. As one female said, *“I live in American now but I am not living like Americans. We do not have the luxury still. My family cannot afford the American lifestyle yet.”* They feel that they cannot live in safe neighborhoods because their parents do not speak enough English to get better paying jobs. Their desire for a good education is both to help their parents in the future and to allow them to move away from their current situation.

While the students had high aspirations for themselves, they seemed to have little understanding or realistic assessment of how they might attain them. Some high school students spoke about becoming programmers or doctors but seemed to have little understanding of what that would involve. Some students currently in college are very successful. Even among this group, however, which includes Somalis majoring in such occupationally promising areas as computer science, biology, and engineering, the turmoil of their pasts is reflected in uncertainty about what they will do in the future. As one female put it, *“We don’t think about tomorrow. We just do what we are doing and whatever happens happens because in five years of our lives so much change has happened. We never know anything for sure”*. A male said, *“I just go to school now and I try my best”*.

Parents' Perspectives

For the most part, the parents interviewed were satisfied with the schooling their children receive. Mothers in particular were very happy that their children were able to be in stable school settings and said their experience with school personnel and teachers has been very positive. Although they admitted there were problems between their kids and Americans students when they first arrived to Maryland, they said the schools (especially the ESOL teachers) were very helpful in getting their children adjusted and keeping them informed. One complaint mothers had was that they cannot be as involved in their children's schooling as they would like to be due to having to work so much.

Discipline. Fathers said that the schools are doing an adequate job teaching their children academically, but should be doing more to discipline the children behaviorally. They said that in Somalia discipline starts in the school and then parents reinforce it in the home. When asked about the types of discipline sought after, they mentioned how in Somalia teachers could use small sticks to strike the students on the arms or legs and the student would be punished in front of the other students so everyone would see the consequences of bad behavior. Fathers mentioned that they feel they cannot discipline their children at home because at school they can act up and not get punished and also because the children tell them they will call 911 and report their parents if they try to touch them. This in essence gives children far more power in the home than they had in Somalia.

Academics. All in all, Somali parents are happy that their children are able to go to school again and receive an education. They did, however, mention several differences between schooling in Somalia and here in the U.S. Parents said that the quality of education was better in Somalia than they see here in America. For example, in Somalia students start learning about all the different sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) from the time they are in elementary school, while here in the U.S. learning about the different sciences does not occur until late middle school or high school. Parents also mentioned that in Somalia students that also care about receiving a good education surround their kids, while here in the U.S. their kids are surrounded by students that do not care about receiving a good education and are not a good influence on them. Lastly, they said that in Somalia the schools and teachers play a more important role in the child's life and the community than do schools and teachers in America. Although the Somali parents had some complaints about the school system in the U.S., they said they were happy that their children were safe and receiving an education.

Teachers' Perspectives

The many interviews with teachers at elementary, middle, and high school as well as staff at the International Student Guidance Office in Prince George's County Schools resulted in a wealth of information about the students, strategies for helping them, and recommendations for the future. Predictably, the kinds of issues most salient for teachers differed depending on the age of the students and the level of school. In general, elementary school students seemed to have an easier time adjusting to school than students in middle or high school. In middle school peer relations and issues of identity development were seen as areas of concern, while at the high school level issues of fighting, dropping out, post high school career planning, and lack of development of basic skills because of years of interrupted education were seen as the greatest problems.

Issues

Different issues emerged throughout the interviews with teachers at all grade levels. They are summarized below. Specific grade levels are noted where applicable.

Academic issues. Academic issues surfaced most strongly at the middle and high school level. Many teachers noted that it seems, "*There are two groups of Somalis students, one of which does well and one of which does not.*" The area of concern involves reading level, where even within the same family one child will be performing well while another will not. Some teachers see this as increasing the risk of dropping out and not being able to find meaningful employment.

In attempting to educate these children school system personnel mentioned a number of issues that hinder their efforts. For example, they report that there are **not enough ESOL teachers** in general for all students who need them and when the students are in mainstream classes they usually have no special help. Several teachers suggested that the school system should consider making ESOL aides available to assist students in mainstream classes. This concern is compounded by the lack of ability to reach parents to discuss the matter and attempt to find compensatory experiences for the students. In addition, in some schools students are in ESOL classes for only one period a day when they need a longer sheltered experience to learn English. Teachers acknowledge the tension between transitioning students as quickly as possible and giving them the needed support when the transition occurs.

Also **placement issues** recurred as a concern for teachers. One teacher expressed her frustration by saying, "*ISGO (International Student Guidance Office) is the enemy.*" The age of students, coupled with their lack of formal education due before immigration makes it difficult to know what to do and needs to be addressed at the system level. One Somali student, for example, was kicked out of school because she was too old even though she had been making progress toward graduating. Another Somali student is 15 years old and placed in middle school. While he is lacking the skills needed to be in high school, he is physically and developmentally much older than his classmates in middle school. There are many implications of this issue that need attention. One involves how

to distinguish students needing special education placement from those with no special needs other than to make up time lost in prior education. Another involves the relationship between a traumatic history and how learning occurs in school and in a potentially noisy and chaotic school environment where the threat of violence is real.

Prince George's County has developed a process for making such diagnostic decisions. The decision to place a student in Special Education involves an initial presentation by an ESOL teacher to a school-based team who presents it to a school system team. In-class observation, parent conferences, and outside referrals for testing may also be included. At each of these points, however, the specific cultural issues and personal history of the student may not be fully understood and the decision compromised accordingly. These issues are extraordinarily complex, and no general solution is evident either locally or nationally. They do, however, highlight the delicate situation facing Somali students in the schools.

The school situation of these students makes it vitally important to try to understand various aspects of how their educational experience is structured and what can be done to improve their circumstances. What is the structure of instruction for these students? Who teaches sheltered ESOL classes and what resources do they have to understand these students? How quickly do students transition and what kind of continuing resources can be made available to those in mainstream classes who still need attention. While some high schools in PG County have sheltered ESOL classes, one structural idea being tried in other parts of the country is the creation of a "Newcomer" school concept-- creating a school within a school for new arrivals to develop the rudimentary skills to enter and complete ESOL adequately.

Behavioral issues. With respect to behavioral issues, Somalis are, in general, seen as well behaved, particularly in comparison to other African students from such countries as Sierra Leone, the Congo, and Liberia. One teacher remarked, *"It is easy for new students to get taken in by the wrong crowd"*. Teachers report that ESOL students are particularly susceptible to developing friendships with troublemakers, learn the "wrong" behavior from them, and end up getting into trouble. This has been evident in fights at the high school level, as reported above, and other incidents in the lower grades. For example, one elementary school example involved the chewing of bubble gum. Somali children had never seen bubble gum before coming to the U.S., were excited about chewing it, and did not know it was not allowed in school. Fortunately teachers realized that their chewing it in class was because no one had ever explained the rules to them. As another example, Somali children had never heard curse words before, did not know they were not to be spoken in schools, and repeated them in the classroom. Again, teachers explained to them that they were inappropriate and the children stopped repeating them.

Additional examples of **cultural misunderstanding** on the part of American teachers and administrators have already been noted. For example, at Parkdale High School, students are not allowed to wear bandanas because they can signal gang affiliations and incite incidents in school. Initially the school responded to Somali girls wearing bandana-styles scarves as if they were wearing gang-affiliated bandanas. While the school

recanted after the Somali girls explained that it was a religious affirmation, the process represents the kind of cultural pressures and misunderstandings that these students sometimes experience in the school setting. Thus, both the occurrence and meaning of behavior problems in the school setting should be assessed in the light of such cultural misunderstandings and potential affronts to these students.

Mental health and social adjustment issues. With respect to mental health issues expressed in the school setting, the two primary concerns expressed by teachers involve family issues related to school performance and the potential residual of trauma experienced before immigration. Some teachers reported that family circumstances may have made it difficult for children to look at family members as people to turn to for help. In some instances parents have been killed and the children are living with relatives. One implication of this for school personnel is that they do not trust that there will be follow up of referrals to families from the school about needed services for the child. In addition, teachers, particularly ESOL teachers, are keenly aware of the potential trauma experienced by Somalis children and youth before immigration. They worry about traumatic content coming up in class because they are not sure how to handle it either in terms of the student expressing the traumatic content or in terms of the other students in the class.

In addition, teachers report that more resources to address mental health issues of children are needed. Teachers felt that there are essentially no counseling resources for students suspected of being traumatized, and no support from mental health specialists for teachers to brainstorm possible solutions (e.g. how to handle behavior problems) in the classroom or involving a particular child. Many teachers asked, *“What should I do if a traumatic memory or story comes up in class?”*

In addition, teachers noted concerns about uncomfortable topics coming up in class due to cultural differences that may not be related to trauma, but that are difficult to handle as well. For example one teacher described a situation where a reading assignment was given an ESOL class on foot binding in ancient China. “I thought this would be a somewhat neutral topic, since none of the children in the classroom were themselves from China, a way to discuss cultural differences and customs, allow the children to talk about these issues in non-threatening ways’. However, one of the Somali students responded that indeed there are different customs in different countries, and that ‘in Somalia they cut the girls’, referring to the widespread practice of infibulation among Somali females. For the teacher, this created a very uncomfortable situation in the classroom, because she did not know how to approach this topic, whether to discuss it, or to not discuss. This incident also illustrates the phenomenology of teaching in these classrooms, as teachers never know what topics will come up, and are worried that when they do arise they will be unprepared to deal with them. Several teachers noted that there is no one for them to turn to in the school system for help in such situations. Further there are no consistent efforts to provide ESL teachers with professional development or consultation with respect to mental health and more general psychological/cultural adjustment issues of the children.

Parent involvement. In general, teachers are concerned about parent involvement in the formal school structures. Attendance of Somali parents at such traditional school events as parent/teacher night and the PTA is seen as negligible in general. In addition, it is difficult to reach Somali families at home because many parents work more than one job and have limited English-speaking skills. At Parkdale High School, where a special ACCESS program exists for refugee and immigrant adolescents, a dinner party organized for parents resulted in only one parent attending. In general, the relationship of parents to the schools is a consistent concern which school personnel see as negatively affecting the school experience of the children. Yet teachers recognize that they need to have access to parents. In one situation, parents of a Muslim girl pulled her out of school because she had gone out on a date, and the parents were concerned that she was being exposed to bad influences at school. Teachers were extremely concerned that their involvement in this situation may have resulted in this young girl not getting her high school education, and that their lack of resources to approach her parents was potentially hurting her future. Though in this case the family was not Somali, similar situations arise with a number of different refugee groups, and community, religious, and cultural resources could be very helpful in negotiating these situations with parents in culturally sensitive ways.

Separation within the school. Many teachers commented on how the ESOL students are separated from the American students within the school. Particularly in the high schools with sheltered ESOL classes, one teacher remarked, *“It’s like two different worlds. ESOL kids hang out with ESOL kids and the American kids don’t know anything about them”*. Thus, Somali students in ESOL were seen as separated from others in the school. Overcoming these barriers would involve creating structures in the schools that bring “American” and refugee/immigrant children together, because such connections are not occurring naturally.

Existing Resources

Our aim was to document the existing resources we noticed to assist Somali children, parents, and teachers who work with them.

The ISGO. The primary structure on the county level is the International Student Guidance Office (ISGO). The ISGO is responsible for registering every new refugee, immigrant, and language minority student (born in the U.S, but where English is not the language of the home), assessing them, and placing them in the appropriate grade and ESOL level. Thus, the first contact and agent dealing with placement issues is the ISGO.

Outreach Counselors. Within this office are ESOL Outreach Counselors. These counselors serve as a resource to school-based counselors in Northern Prince George’s County. They identify areas of concern with school counselors relating to language minority students, and in conjunction with school teams, work to implement solutions. They assist new counselors at ESOL center schools to develop competencies and resources for working with ESOL students, and they work collaboratively with school counselors to provide services to ESOL students and their families. They conduct newcomer groups for educational and cultural adjustment support as a follow-up to

registration at the International Student Guidance Office and advocate for ESOL students and their families at service-providing agencies in the community. In addition, they work collaboratively with school counselors to provide workshops for parents/guardians of ESOL students on topics such as study skills, accessing school and community services, transitioning from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school and preparing for post-secondary education. However, the counselors have a wide range of job responsibilities and the ability of the counselors to have adequate time to fulfill them all is questionable. There are 3 counselors responsible for providing service to 34 schools, making it essentially impossible for them to get to know the schools or individuals students well. In addition, these counselors are called upon to be advocates for students and families as well, making their job even more difficult to carry out.

Interpreter Bank. In addition to outreach counselors, the county has as Interpreter bank of certified interpreters available for parent-teacher meetings. To be certified they have to attend a 3-½ hour training session. There are about 5-6 Somali interpreters working with PG County schools who are available for parent-teacher meetings, conferences, and contacting families in their homes. They have also translated some documents explaining Prince George's County schools into Somali such as the Handbook for Parents of ESOL Students in Prince George's County Public Schools, absence letters, health fact sheets, codes of conduct, dress codes, family cards, free and reduced lunch applications, nonparticipation for religious reasons forms, and parent conference letters. A list of these documents is available on the following website:

www.pgcps.org/~ssprogr/esol_translations.html.

Resources for Parents. There are also resources available to parents. One or two school-based parent liaisons are present in each school. Among them there are 2 Somali Parent-Liaisons in PG County schools, both at the elementary school level (Mr. Ali at Templeton and Ms. Omar at Judge Sylvania Woods). At the high school level, there is a parent liaison who is African, and is seen as a very positive resource for Somali and other African students. In addition, the Coalition for the Foreign-Born (a county wide group who deal with non-English speaking populations) puts out a newsletter, "The East-West Hwy", which contains information about PG County relevant to parents (news, services, agencies) and is published in 6 languages including Somali. The newsletter is edited by Dr. John Nelson of county ESOL and can be found at the county ESOL office as well as in agencies that deal with refugees. Adult education funded by the school system is also available and is held in the evenings at area schools in Prince George's County.

Professional development. Teachers noted some existing professional development opportunities that have been useful in assisting them with ESL and mental health issues. There are workshops for Mainstream teachers, consisting of 2 series of presentations conducted each year (fall and spring). Each series has 3 sessions, and each session is 3 ½ hours long. These workshops, led by Dr. John Nelson of County ESOL, focus on cultural sensitivity, ESOL methodology, cross-cultural issues, expectations for ESOL students, and the role of the teacher. We were unable to gather information on their effectiveness as perceived by teachers. However, our interviews suggest that at best they are helpful but not sufficient to address the problems described.

In addition, in June 2001, Drs. Dina Birman and Juliet Dinkha conducted a one-day workshop at Parkdale High School for ESOL teachers and guidance counselors in June 2001. At this session, teachers were eager to describe to these psychologists particular children and families they have had problems with and together they strategized how to handle these situations.

Classroom Techniques/Approaches

We talked to teachers about the different techniques and approaches they have used or seen to be successful in working with Somali and other refugee students. They are listed below to provide a “toolkit of best practices” to share with other educators.

“Buddy system”. At the elementary school level, teachers reported trying a "buddy system" where American born students who were doing particularly well in school would pair with Somali students and help in a variety of classroom roles such as studying together.

Role modeling. Having students help each other in class, or mentoring of younger refugee students by older ones, were in the spirit of elementary and middle school teacher comments. In our interviews with Somali youth many felt that such buddy or mentoring programs at the middle school or high school level would have been helpful to them when they first arrived.

Learning a few words in the refugee language. Some elementary school teachers commented that learning even a few key words in Somali conveyed to the students an interest and allowed them to be the "experts" by teaching teachers common words (e.g., numbers, colors, greetings). Another teacher learned some Somali words on her own and then surprised her Somali students by using the words in class.

Field trips. Strategically, elementary school teachers found that doing field trips, and having a great deal of hands on experience with language was useful to do before trying to get students to read themselves. In addition, teachers at all levels agreed that field trips are useful tools for exposing refugee students to new situations and American customs.

Instructional aides. Having teachers' aides who could pull students aside or out of class for more intensive instruction was highlighted at the middle school level. Although not trained in ESOL, these aides provided some additional one-on-one attention for refugee students in mainstream content classes.

Journaling. At the high school level some teachers found that having Somali students write in journals allowed them to express ideas and concerns that they did not do verbally in class. It also helped teachers assess what writing and understanding level each student is at informally.

Individualized planning. The importance of individualized planning with respect to literacy needs, behavioral issues, and emotional concerns was stressed. The fact that even within ESOL levels considerable between-student variability was found supported even further the importance of getting to know each student well.

Disciplinary system. Several teachers mentioned the importance of consistently implementing a strict and fair disciplinary system. One outlined a “check on the board” system whereby every time a student got into some kind of trouble a check was placed after their name on the board. Three checks and they were given a detention. The teacher said that usually at two checks the behavior changed. Teachers also thought that it was important for them to have information about Somali culture and that they needed to learn some rudimentary words in Somali.

Special clubs, programs, and projects. Clubs, such as the “People around the world club” at Parkdale High School, provides a place for American and International students to learn about different cultures and societies. The “Newcomers’ Club” is a special club for new international students run by the ESOL Outreach Counselors at various schools. It gives new international students a supportive group setting to air observations and concerns they have encountered in their new American setting. In addition, the Homework Club in the community is seen as an important resource for Somali students. Programs, such as the ACCESS program for low achieving ESOL students at Parkdale HS, serve a very critical function in getting to know and being a resource for Somali students. Projects, such as Peacemakers at Parkdale HS, sponsored in previous years by MONA, provided skits and assemblies which discussed or showed examples of cultural differences and problem-solving skills in negotiating them. The lack of consistency and duration of some of these efforts have limited their usefulness, however.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered as a result of our interviews with teachers and members of the community. While our focus has been on understanding the experience of Somali refugee students, many of the problems and recommendations are relevant for other refugee children attending PG County schools. In fact, since the Somali refugees came a number of years ago and can reflect back upon the hardships they first experienced, many of the suggestions made by teachers and students can be used to plan for future refugee influxes, as many of the recommendations can apply to other refugee populations.

A. Mental health issues, behavior problems, and discipline in the classroom

Teachers were very concerned about the impact of traumatic stress on the Somali students. It is interesting to note, though, that the students themselves did not mention trauma per se as an issue for them, though some did talk about very painful experiences reconciling their past in Somalia and refugee camps with their every day realities in this country. Further, parents did not bring up trauma as an issue they saw their children struggling with. Our sense is that while the topic did not come up for the children and the parents, trauma may indeed be an important issue to address, and regardless of how it is

perceived by the children and their parents, teachers need helping figuring out how to think about it in the course of their daily teaching activities. Teachers felt that it was important for the students to have “*someone objective, yet caring, to talk to*”, be it a counselor, a social worker, or ESOL teacher. In fact, the reluctance of the students and parents to discuss trauma issues may point the difficulties they face in talking about the topic, or preference not to with outsiders. Many teachers felt unequipped to handle behavior problems that arise in the classroom, particularly when they suspect that behavior problems, and perhaps anger being expressed by students are a consequence of past exposure to trauma or current difficulties with adaptation. Teachers need assistance determining how to handle such situations, and managing problem behaviors in the classroom without feeling that they are being unkind or unfair to students who are experiencing difficulties.

Recommendations:

- ❑ The school system needs to consider making counselors available to refugee students when needed.
- ❑ Teachers can benefit from on-going consultation from mental health experts on managing classroom behavior, and addressing mental health issues in the classroom. Mental health professionals can help teachers resolve difficult situations and strategize about how to handle particular children, develop a behavior modification plan for a particular child, or strategies to manage behavior for all students in the classroom. Mental health professionals can also recommend classroom strategies, such as journaling currently being used, to help children handle their difficult emotions and express them appropriately
- ❑ Teachers working with refugee students have develop some creative ways of addressing issues that arise in their classrooms, and can benefit from opportunities to share “best practices” and what works in their classrooms, and exchange ideas.
- ❑ Schools should provide more support for ESOL teachers, perhaps having a place or person to go to discuss the distinctive problems they face, and receive emotional support and task assistance for the complex and difficult job they have and listening to their problems.

B. Academics and staying in school

In the academic realm, Somali students have trouble envisioning future careers, and understanding all the steps they need to follow to achieve career and educational goals. Some of the problem stems from lack of understanding of how the U.S. system functions on the part of both the students and their parents. In addition, our observation is that many families are used to living in a “survival mode”, and don’t have the knowledge of the system or resources to plan ahead for their children’s future. Dropping out is also a problem.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Mentoring programs can be established to support and encourage refugee youth to do better in school, stay in school, and teach them about different careers after school. This process may include goal setting, learning about college or job application processes, and test-taking skills. With respect to the latter, for example, one student did poorly on a multiple-choice test because he had never taken a test requiring the specific answering format used.

- ❑ Develop incentives to stay in school. The concern with drop-outs, particularly among males, led to a focus on developing incentives to stay in school, such as having the school provide a jobs program, internships, or summer work which can aid in financial matters which simultaneously keeping students in school and providing an opportunity to develop future job skills.

C. Assessment

The issue of how to distinguish ESOL students with special needs and learning difficulties from those whose problems stem from interrupted educational backgrounds is seen as especially troubling for schools. The general issue of assessment in the context of cultural bias and language/translation difficulties was seen as very difficult to deal with at the present time.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Hire someone with training in both ESOL and Special Education who can provide consultation to teachers with respect to how to differentiate between the two. A person trained in both specialties could be helpful in assessing and diagnosing students with learning disabilities as opposed to language problems. Such a person could also serve as a resource to the county's dual-language assessment team by training other guidance personnel and ESOL teachers in how to recognize ESOL students that have special education needs and refer them for the proper assessments.
- ❑ Create a forum, such as a task force/work group that can continue to identify new methods for assessing international and language minority students (e.g., talk to different school systems to see what they are doing, keep up on the latest research).

D. Integration and Structure of ESOL

Teachers mentioned that ESOL and American students and also ESOL and mainstream teachers did not know much about each other. American students and teachers are unaware of the situations causing refugee students to arrive at their schools. Lastly, teachers commented on the structure of ESOL in their schools. Several high schools were happy with their new sheltered content courses, but many teachers in the elementary and middle school level stated that refugee students with interrupted education were coming into their schools lacking basic skills and that one or two ESOL classes a day were not enough to compensate.

Recommendations:

- ❑ Provide more cultural orientation to mainstream teachers and American students to help them understand the culture of the refugee students (e.g., skits like those performed at Parkdale High School, workshops on cultural sensitivity and diversity).
- ❑ An idea which has taken hold in other major cities in recent years is developing a special place that new students could go to for 6 months or a year that is very structured and supportive before entering the regular ESOL process. Often called "Newcomer Centers", such a setting is seen as particularly relevant for students who have had extremely limited prior formal education. Here they could learn basic skills they are lacking and become accustomed to American culture before entering the regular schools. This idea is one deserving of serious attention not only for Somali students but for other refugee adolescents as well.

CONCLUSION

Overall, our interviews with students, parents, and school system personnel suggest that while many Somali adolescents are doing well in school, both they and the school system face significant challenges in providing the necessary educational and sociocultural supports needed to make the most of their lives after immigration. The need seems more serious for older than younger Somali students, as across the board school system personnel focused on middle- and particularly high school-aged students as having more difficulty than those in the elementary grades. Here, more intergroup fighting with and teasing from American peers was noted, as was a greater lack of both peer and teacher cultural understanding and fewer resources adequate to deal with educational and psychosocial needs of Somali youth.

The wide range of issues and possible solutions across all levels of the school system suggest the value of gathering information from different stakeholders in the spirit of developing a coordinated effort to improve the educational and life circumstances of these students. Many discrete, specific suggestions have emerged in our conversations with parents, students, and school system personnel, and are outlined above. Where energy and resources are available they should be developed to their fullest. In addition, however, it seems that a variety of efforts could be made which focus on a combination of issues of placement, sharing of relevant information about students with teachers, in-school resources, and out-of-school settings for Somali students. Convening a group representing different concerned parties seems like one step toward actualizing a coordinated approach to supporting these students. In addition, ongoing efforts like the homework club in Riverdale can be augmented through support for space, payment for tutors, and computers, printers, and Internet access to do student research and type reports.